



RANTS & RAVES

As Uncle Sam demands unprecedented access to our personal data, Mel Croucher boycotts the US. Simon Edwards, meanwhile, has had enough of free speech on the net

THE LONG GOODBYE



MEL CROUCHER RANTS

There are 193 countries on this beautiful Earth. So far, I have been to 53 of them. I've been held at gunpoint in a hot country, I've been roughed up in a cold country, gone missing in a wet country and expelled from a dry country. I have lived under the regimes of fascist dictators, communist puppets, homicidal maniacs and evangelical idiots. I have witnessed military coups, civil wars, revolutions,

counter-revolutions and once, on New Year's Day in a small tropical republic, I saw the entire population of the capital city drunk out of their skulls on horseback. And I would cheerfully go back to any of these countries, except one: the United States of America.

After the latest craven deal with the US Department of Homeland Security, I have had enough. As a British citizen, my email and credit card details can now be accessed and inspected by the American authorities. When I say details, I mean all my email correspondence and credit card

transactions. On top of that, the US Customs Authority is now empowered to search and seize my laptop, PDA or mobile phone as I enter the country, not on any grounds of suspicion, but purely at random. Unlike a US citizen, I am not protected by the 4th Amendment, which prohibits unreasonable search and seizure.

SEIZE THE DATA

If only that were all. Sadly, it's not. If I fly to the USA later this year, I will have all 10 of my fingerprints scanned and stored on the FBI database, to be matched with my

email records, my financial files and whatever other data is held on me. This information will be shared with any intelligence agency the American authorities choose, with no restriction on international use, if they so deem.

This would be the most dangerous infringement on my civil rights that I have experienced in any other country I have ever visited, and I have already revealed to you that I have visited a great many. The argument that if I have nothing to hide then I have nothing to fear is fallacious. I have everything to fear from a US regime reliant on gargantuan databases, interdependent networks and a bunch of paranoid arseholes extracting data they believe is about me and passing it on to another bunch of paranoid arseholes in some other country. Because I Know How Badly These Systems Work. It's what I do for a living, and it's shot full of holes.

All this is a cause of genuine sorrow. I have good friends in New



York, Philadelphia, Seattle and Laurel Canyon. But I have never gazed at Death Valley, nor eaten oysters in Grand Central Station. I have never driven Route 66, nor heard the blues played in Chicago. And now I suppose I never will.

If the four million other Brits who will visit the USA this year were to boycott the place, the US Department of Homeland Security may think twice about this paranoid system of computerised abuse, which is scheduled to be fully operational by 2008. But I guess my fellow four million Brits are prepared to be treated like terrorist suspects and dehumanised scum. I, for one, am not.

READ ONLY



**SIMON EDWARDS
RANTS**

It seems like only yesterday that my French teacher, a massive man known as 'Muscles' Martin, slammed my exercise book on the

desk. On opening it eagerly to see my mark, which was poor as usual, I first observed the comment scrawled in red ink across the page's bottom: "Idle goat!"

At least I only had to share this ignominy with my parents. The character-building judgement wasn't pasted on the noticeboard, read out in assembly or uploaded to the internet (which didn't exist at the time). Things would perhaps have been different had PCs and public networks existed.

Certainly these days people seem quite happy to upload essays, personal photos and even their own novels to the internet and, in true blogging style, allow others to make very public comments. This strikes me as masochistic, a persuasion I've never learned to appreciate (despite garnering masses of wedgie and Chinese burn experience in those long, dark corridors of the old school).

Traditional magazines, newspapers and other printed media offer readers the chance to express themselves on the letters pages, but the editors have ultimate control over what gets printed. The benefit of this to the publication is that it can spike letters that claim to point out that the editor looks like a genetic throwback, that the columns aren't as funny as they used to be or that I am a "20-something drone in a corporate office churning out propaganda".

IDIOT WIND

The benefit to you the reader is that complete idiots are left without a public voice and you get to read only those opinions with an interesting point to make. You don't have to wade through the angry, incomprehensible emissions of the zombie nation, unless we throw in a few for entertainment purposes. Radio 4's *Any Answers* is a good example. Call up and start insulting Jonathan Dimpleby and you'll be cut off sharpish (I'd guess). Keep a civil tongue in your head while arguing for bringing back the birch or introducing eugenics and you're guaranteed at least 20 minutes of airtime.

The editor's ability to censor and get the last word in is brilliant for everyone. Why would anyone in their right minds give free, unrestricted access to the milling masses so they can vent directly on to the page of an article? To be cool, that's why. Many mainstream newspapers and magazines now use the internet to embrace the current fashion for 'blogging', which is just another word for web publishing, albeit one permeated with a propensity for poor

grammar, factual inaccuracy and eye-wateringly boring content. And I'm not just talking about the readers' comments.

ATTENTION SEEKING

This is why I would like to start a 'Read Only' campaign. Ban the deluge of feedback that goes unread and uncared for on billions of webpages. Don't waste your time casting your tuppenneth into a vast abyss. Write a proper letter, or at least an email, if you want someone to pay attention.

Two months ago, I wrote an article about a racist email. I've had lots of mail about that piece, most of it nice with very few accusations of me being pinko commie scum or an "unthinking moron... publishing the government's propaganda". Despite the fact that I've just typed some, you won't see most of the nasty comments because they are happily languishing in my email inbox, and there they will stay.

Unfortunately, by the time you read this article in the magazine, these very words will be available on *Shopper's* website where you can add your views to mine (click the Add comments button below, if you are reading this online). Mr Martin, sir. If you are tempted to comment, please be kind...

SPEAK NO EVIL



**SIMON EDWARDS
RANTS**

Now that Windows Vista is all over the place, you've probably started hearing scare stories about how this latest operating system from Microsoft isn't as secure as it claims. In fact, I've heard about a terrible new security flaw that enables bad guys to take over your PC and do awful things such as email your financial accounts to Chinese hackers and wipe your Media Center TV recordings. Before your eyes glaze over, I'm not about to drone on about buffer overflows or any of that technical nonsense. I'm going to warn you about voice recognition.

Windows Vista comes with voice recognition included. It's not always accurate, as you can see in an amusing video of a failing Microsoft demonstration on YouTube (<http://tinyurl.com/jelof>). But when it works, it could be devastating. For example, accidentally exclaim something along the lines of "start listening, run Windows Explorer, pictures, press Control A, press Shift-Delete, Yes" and you could wipe your hard disk of irreplaceable images.

OK, I admit that this is an unlikely event, but what if you

visited a website that blared out the above statement? Assuming your speakers and microphone are switched on it will be 'hasta la Vista' to those photos. You can see evidence of this 'hack' in action at <http://tinyurl.com/2lqmyw>. Just make sure you turn off your microphone when watching or you risk losing your digital photos.

Microsoft notes that this is an unlikely attack due to all the planets that must be in alignment before it can work. Furthermore, the Windows Vista User Access Control (UAC) system should stop really bad things happening. If you're not yet familiar with Vista, try to make certain critical changes to Windows' settings and you'll see a prompt asking if you want to continue. This is UAC checking it's you that wants to make the change and not some spyware. As UAC can't be controlled by voice recognition, it provides a safeguard. You still have UAC enabled, don't you? Of course you do.

WHAT'S THE WORD?



**SIMON EDWARDS
RAVES**

It's too early in Vista's life for me to have done anything as stupid as forgetting my new password and locking myself out of the PC. But it's only a matter of time. To mitigate the risk, I have investigated a new tool from Elcomsoft. This security company is best known for producing tools for recovering passwords from locked files, including encrypted Zip archives, protected Word documents and even PGP-encrypted files. Its latest release is called Elcomsoft System Recovery (ESR), and it allows you to start your Vista PC using a boot disk and walk the fine line between system recovery and hacking.

The program will enumerate the accounts on the system and can try to crack short passwords straight away. It can also dump all encrypted passwords to a text file, which you can load into password-cracking software and attempt to recover the original passwords. You can't do this with ESR, but Elcomsoft's Proactive Password Auditor will happily run a number of attacks on the text file to calculate the original passwords.

The features that let you reset a password and unlock accounts are the most useful for anyone who wants to rescue their own, accidentally knackered systems. The program's ability to assign administrator rights to any account is more questionable. For instant hacker abilities, visit www.elcomsoft.com and pay £239. ☹